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ABSTRACT

For one graduate student administrator at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, some examples of what she considers to be teacher apathy are: complaints by the writing laboratory director that a teaching assistant (TA) was not using the recommended readings but a Nietzsche essay to have his students explore a contemporary political issue, and another TA who professed not to care that 14 of her 43 students had failed English 101. The administrator states that she is often made to feel that she could care a lot less about composition--and still care more than most of her fellow graduate students teaching composition. They teach it because the choice is not between teaching composition and teaching something else but between teaching composition and not teaching--and not getting funded for their graduate work. The administrator, on the other hand, does not see composition as a necessary stepping stone to the kind of teaching she "really" cares about because composition is the kind of teaching she really cares about. So, although she can relate to the emotional ups and downs that new instructors go through, displays of apathy leave her stumped and struggling to manufacture an appropriate response. As Joanna Atwood Brown suggests in "Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadors" the graduate student administrator may find herself both exposed to--and alienated by--the apathy of the instructors she supervises in a way most faculty would not be. As a "peer who isn't a peer," the graduate student administrator can seem like the perfect person to confide in but still complain about composition. Brown calls for a support network which does not necessarily have to stand in tension with critical conversations. (NKA)

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When We Could Care Less: The Taboo Subject of Teacher Apathy.

by Piper Murray

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Piper Murray

CCCC Roundtable

22 March 2002

When We Could Care Less: The Taboo Subject of Teacher Apathy

At last year's 4 C's, I was assigned to chair a session titled "From Apathy to Active Participation: Pedagogical Practices of Engagement." Though it was not explicitly stated *whose* apathy the title referred to, it hardly needed to be; as a slip of the tongue during the discussion period served to remind us, we all knew why we were there. "Yes," the first questioner began, after listening to the three panelists. "I'm interested in hearing more about specific strategies you have for combatting teacher's apathy toward the writing topics we assign them." "Well, we don't have any answers for *teacher* apathy . . . ," one of the panelists said with a grin. Everyone smiled and a few chuckles could be heard. Somehow we had all known that the questioner had meant to ask about the apathy *students* feel, not teachers. The panelists went on to answer the question that the questioner had *intended* to ask, and, after several more minutes of discussion, I closed the session: "tune in next year for the sequel to this session: what to do when *you* could care less about the writing assignments you assign!" We all shared another laugh and filed out into the lobby for some more burned coffee.

It wasn't until I had my seatbelt securely fastened across my lap and was watching the Rocky mountains give way once again to the flat checkerboard of farm country that I took a moment to wonder why the idea of a panel on teacher apathy had struck us all as so silly. The slip might have been mildly funny in almost any context, but there was something especially funny about the idea that we would all be getting together at the Cs to talk about *teacher* apathy. The very idea was unthinkable. After all, why would we travel all this way, stay up way too late finishing our own papers, and getting up way too early to listen to others', unless we all, fundamentally and essentially, cared about teaching composition? The Rock 'n' Roll dance was fun, but it wasn't that fun. Okay, maybe it was that fun, but you know what I mean. And yet, as I

pulled my dayplanner out and began thinking once again about the semester I was flying back into, I realized just how much that slip of the tongue, funny as it might have been, actually spoke to a feeling that worries much of my work as a graduate student administrator at UWM.

It is a Monday night, the third week of fall semester. I am just sitting down with my mentor group, which meets weekly for the last hour of English 701, the course in composition theory and practice required of all first-year teaching assistants at UWM. Before I have a chance even to start the meeting, one of my mentees abruptly turns to me and asks, "Why are new TAs required to read so much composition theory? Nothing against composition, or anything," he says, "but I don't think most of us care about the theory as much; what we need is stuff we can use in class." I disagree wholeheartedly with my mentee's diagnosis of his own needs, but, not wanting to launch my mentor group with a lecture on the importance of composition theory, I mumble something about time constraints and move on.

It is a bright Thursday morning more than halfway through the semester, and the director of the writing center appears in my office doorway. She hates to bother me, but she's been hearing complaints from tutors that she thinks I ought to know about. It seems that 101 students are coming into the writing center for help with an assignment that even the tutors find impossible: to use an essay by Nietzsche to explore a contemporary political issue. Besides being far too difficult for first-year writers, the assignment clearly deviates from those outlined in the general syllabus that all 101 instructors are required to teach—and that it is my responsibility to make sure they teach. I casually confront the instructor the next time I see him and remind him of the recommended readings. He apologizes, but everything about his body language tells me: he could care less about the recommended readings. Three weeks later, the writing center director's face appears once more in my doorway: it seems his students are now seeking help with Hegel.

Finally, it is the end of a long day at the end of the semester. We have just completed large-scale portfolio assessment, the culmination of a semester's worth of planning and practice meetings that it is my responsibility as Coordinator of English 101 to organize. Tomorrow, the appeals committee will meet to read appeals, but for tonight, we are all relaxing at the department Christmas party. As I head toward the keg, an instructor approaches and tells me that another instructor in her assessment group had 14 of her 43 students fail—and that, to top it off, she isn't planning to appeal a single one of the committee's decisions. Spotting her over by the buffet table, I ask her why she isn't appealing. "Hey," she says, popping the last bite of a Christmas cookie into her mouth. "If my students didn't pass, they didn't pass. I could care less." Shocked by her apathy and not sure how to respond, I mumble something about maybe reconsidering and pretend to go looking for more hummus.

As all of these anecdotes suggest, teacher apathy is not, in fact, so outlandish an idea in my daily life as it seemed that day at last year's Cs. Such displays of apathy are hardly the norm in my experience with teacher training, but they are also far from unusual. As a graduate student in rhetoric and composition, a course coordinator in the composition program, and a mentor to new TAs teaching composition, I am often made to feel that I could care a lot less about composition—and *still* care more than most of my fellow graduate students teaching composition. Many, in fact most, of my fellow graduate students do not teach composition by choice. They teach it because the choice is not between teaching composition and teaching something else but between teaching composition and not teaching—and not getting funded for their graduate work. By contrast, my own choice to become a grad student WPA testifies daily to the fact that I don't see composition as a necessary stepping stone to the kind of teaching I *really* care about because it *is* the kind of teaching I really care about. Perhaps for this simple reason, while I can certainly relate to all the emotional ups and downs that new instructors go through,

displays of apathy like those above tend to leave me stumped, floundering, struggling to manufacture an appropriate response.

While scholarship on emotion in composition has given us ways of thinking more critically through the love and disappointment and empathy of aJministration, it has had less to say about those moments, those semesters, those aspects of our job where we expect to find feeling but find none. And while we have analyzed exhaustively the politics, rhetoric, and ethics of care in composition, we have yet to truly investigate the politics, rhetoric, and ethics of not caring, of caring less. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that we do not usually think of apathy as an emotion. Indeed, apathy is, by its very definition, a lack of emotion. And certainly it is difficult to talk about lack—something that isn't there to talk about in the first place. But as anyone who has felt apathetic or has felt the apathy of others knows, apathy is not nothing: insofar as it is felt, as we are made to feel it, apathy is an emotional state—and one we feel, are made to feel, often as writing program administrators. Common sense goes a long way to fill up this critical void. After all, it seems common sense that we should care more about composition. Of *course* we care more about composition than they do; that is what we are paid to do, that is my course of choice and my course of study. Of *course* my caring can feel like work but, then, I couldn't care less if I tried. In many ways, becoming a compositionist, for as long as there has been such a thing, has actually meant embracing this fact. But lately I've begun to wonder whether this common sense hasn't in fact kept us from getting a more critical sense of the apathy it takes for granted.

It is probably true that any WPA is regularly made to feel the apathy of those who wouldn't touch comp with a ten foot pole if they didn't have to. As Johanna Atwood Brown suggests in *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadors*, however, the graduate student administrator may find herself both exposed to—and alienated by—the apathy of the instructors she supervises in a way that most faculty would not be. For while TAs tend to speak the party

line whenever administrative faculty are present, they are less likely to censor themselves around other grad students; indeed, as what Brown calls a "peer who isn't a peer," the grad administrator can seem like the perfect person to confide in, at once able to sympathize with and, because of her "official position," in some sense sanction their complaints about composition. Meanwhile, the difference between not caring for composition and caring deeply about it as your chosen profession may be felt all the more acutely by the grad administrator as it continually reminds her that she is, as Brown puts it, somewhat of "an anomaly in the graduate student world" (125).

Writing of her own experience as a grad student administrator (in fact, in the very position that I now occupy), Brown describes how she found herself habitually at a loss when confronted with what she perceived as teachers' lack of interest in the composition course that she coordinated. She describes the problems that she had with one teacher and friend in particular: "One of my friends . . . turned out to be what I considered, quite simply, a horrible teacher," she writes. She goes on to describe how she tried, in her "official capacity as coordinator, to help him work on teaching," but to no avail: the harder she tried, the clearer he made it that he just couldn't care less about teaching composition. "Of course, I guess I knew he wasn't 'into' teaching, like those of us in Rhetoric and Composition," Brown explains, "but that fact didn't register until he was working with me" (123). From this perspective, the world can certainly seem divided into those who care about composition and those who don't. And the apparent apathy of those who don't can feel like a judgment against, not to mention a whole lot of extra work for, those who do. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Brown ends her discussion on a note of ambivalence that many grad administrators might relate to: on the one hand, her experience as a grad student WPA was essential to her professional development; on the other hand, having to negotiate this tricky terrain seems to have permanently shaken her faith in being able to cross the divide between those who care about composition and those who do not. Rather than offering suggestions for how to cross this divide or negotiate it, Brown concludes her discussion with recommendations largely aimed at making grad student

administrators feel less stranded on their side of this divide. She calls for a stronger "support network" among administrators, including regular meetings and social events with others who are "into" teaching "like those of us in rhetoric and composition." Brown cites as one of the chief benefits of her own experience with such a support network the fact that it made her "feel part of a distinct group and less of an anomaly in the graduate student world" (125), since it meant that, as she puts it, she "didn't have to talk about [her] difficulties with TAs who were not administrators" (125).

I could not agree more with Brown that an administrative support network is essential to helping grad students both to develop professionally and to feel like less of an "anomaly" in the process. In my own experience, regular meetings and strong working relationships with faculty and fellow grad administrators have been an invaluable source of both administrative know-how and emotional support—support that I, quite simply, feel like I could not do without. And certainly much of this feeling has to do with the comfort of feeling "part of a distinct group." At the same time, however, I am also haunted by memory that it was only through talking months later to the TA who said she "could care less" that 14 of her students failed that I began to understand what she had really meant. She told me that, as a creative writer, she had disagreed vehemently with the assignments she was being asked to teach and the goals and outcomes she was being asked to teach toward, but that she felt powerless to do anything about it. In other words, while she had meant to say that she couldn't care less, she in fact could have cared a lot less; in fact, she couldn't have cared more, but she felt that the composition program put her in a position in which her caring made no difference, a position in which, indeed, she was better off not caring. I'm not sure what I might have done with this information; I still feel like this TA had a responsibility to teach the assignments and goals according to which her students would be assessed. But the fact is, my own assumption that she just didn't give a damn about teaching like those of us in rhetoric and composition actually caused me to see a lack of feeling where there was in fact a great deal of feeling—and kept me from hearing what I imagine is actually a

common source of what appears to be teacher apathy: the perception that one is better off not caring since all the caring in the world won't make a difference. That one would, in short, be a *fool* to care.

Of course, the kind of support network and identification that Brown calls for does not necessarily have to stand in tension with such critical conversations; in fact, I want to conclude by suggesting that it may be essential to them. In this context, however, "support" would mean enabling grad administrators to make knowledge, rather than retreat from, their identities as peers who aren't peers." It would mean enabling them to identify with those who care about composition without having to actively disidentify with those who supposedly don't. It would mean keeping in mind, perhaps, that most TAs don't care for composition the way "we in rhetoric and composition" do, but also providing a forum for reflecting more carefully on the different ways in which they do care, on what encouragement and reasons we give them to care. It would mean asking the kinds of tough questions about apathy that we have asked about so many other emotional aspects of administrative work: what it means, what kind of work it calls for, how we are compensated for that work, what institutional or political structures perpetuate it, how we might construct it differently, how we might contribute to it. And finally, it would mean exploring why, when it comes to teachers' apathy, we sometimes wish we could care less—but somehow never do.

Work Cited

Brown, Johanna Atwood. "The Peer Who Isn't a Peer." *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers and Troubadours: Writing Program Administrators Tell Their Stories*. Ed. Diana George. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1999. 120-5.